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SUBJECT: GOI ACTION ON AMONA PRODUCES BACKLASH AGAINST
SETTLERS, HIGHLIGHTS DIVISIONS IN SETTLER MOVEMENT

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[1](#)B. TEL AVIV 000389

[1](#)C. TEL AVIV 000481

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 (b)
) and (d)

This is a joint Embassy Tel Aviv/Consulate General Jerusalem
cable.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Post contacts from the GOI and the private sector assert that the February 1 demolitions in Amona outpost "send strong signals to the settlers" that Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is not going to give in to lawbreakers. The demolitions in Amona are now being hailed as a new era in the enforcement of the law against settlers. The result is that since the demolition of the nine permanent houses at the outpost, and the clashes that ensued between settlers and Israeli security personnel, the Israeli media has overwhelmingly denounced the settlers for breaking the law. Opinion polls show the Israeli public placing blame on the settlers, not the security services, for the violence that took place. However, the Israeli human rights organization B'tselem fears that excessive police force used at Amona may lead to increased settler attacks against Palestinians. In addition, the events of recent weeks raise questions about what is happening internally to the settler movement. The settler movement may be splitting into three groups: those who appear willing to withdraw from the territories; the radical right-wing, comprised mostly of violent settler youth; and a "lost" leadership that is out of touch with reality and incapable of making decisions on what to do in the face of future evacuations. The impact on Olmert's standing has yet to be determined. End summary.

Settlers Are Losing Public Support

[1](#)2. (U) In the aftermath of the demolition of nine permanent houses in Amona outpost near Ofra settlement on February 1, Israeli pundits across the political spectrum have sharply criticized the violence that took place there. While many -- including the human rights (and anti-settlement) organization B'tselem -- have said that the police used excessive force in dealing with the settlers, most editorials nevertheless have overwhelmingly denounced the settlers themselves for breaking the law (ref A). Writers from Ha'aretz, the Jerusalem Post, Ma'ariv, Yediot Aharonot, and even the right-wing Hatzofe, used terms such as anarchists, lawbreakers, religious ideologues, and followers of the State of Judaea (vice the State of Israel), to describe the rioting that the youth settlers undertook to try to prevent the demolitions.

-- Ha'aretz's Amos Har'el wrote that "the right-wing victims are not innocent. The thousands who gathered on the hill did not come to protest but to clash. Not a handful, but hundreds of them, exercised extreme violence."

-- An editorial in the Jerusalem Post asserted that "the use of violence of any sort against security forces is unacceptable... When security forces arrive, protestors must go willingly or at least not violently resist arrest or removals."

-- An editorial in Hatzofe wrote that "having failed in their war on crime, the police use extreme force against Zionist religious youth. It is a shame that our state has come to this. However, this does not mean that we support the law-breaking by Land of Israel loyalists."

Opinion Polls Turn Against Settlers

[1](#)3. (U) Opinion polls taken during the two days after the demolitions have shown that the settler movement is also losing the support of the Israeli public. In a Teleset poll carried out on February 1 and published in Ma'ariv, a majority of 54.3 percent blamed the settlers for the violence. When asked how they felt about settlers who used force to resist the evacuation, 42.1 percent said they felt solidarity with the settlers but not the resistance, 22.2 percent opposed the settlers generally, and 18.2 percent "opposed (the settlers) to the point of abhorrence." Over 49

percent said that the police used a reasonable amount of force, and 10.4 percent said that the police used too little force. In a Dahaf Institute poll published in Yediot Aharonot on February 3 entitled "Nobody Sheds a Tear," 57 percent of those polled blamed the violence on the settlers, 16 percent blamed the army and the police, 10 percent blamed both sides, and 4 percent blamed the government. Some 58 percent of those polled said the outpost should have been evacuated.

The Beginning of the Rule of Law?

14. (U) Talia Sasson's March 2005 report on illegal outposts in the West Bank clearly showed a double standard in the enforcement of the rule of law with settlers in the West Bank as opposed to Israelis residing Green Line Israel. Ha'aretz's Akiva Eldar throughout the past year has often written about the distinct difference in what happens in Israel, and what happens "on the other side of the fence." Israeli media now, however, have called the Amona demolitions the beginning of a new era for the rule of law. As one editorial said, "The evacuation of Amona is an important point of reference. After the state -- due to enthusiastic cooperation, in most governments -- spent two generations bowing its head helplessly and blindly before the people of the wild west, who forced the entire Israeli society to obey their violent rules of the game, the settlers have finally woken up to a new reality. This is the first time that the State of Israel -- via the government, the judicial system, the army and the police -- is implementing the law in the occupied territories in the West Bank." Significantly, National Infrastructure Minister Roni Bar-On was quoted as saying that the government's "era of restraint" in dealing with settler protestors is over: "We restrained ourselves in Gush Qatif. We restrained ourselves in Hebron, in Yitzhar, and in outposts for a long time, even if people there physically injured security forces there. That's finished. The era of restraint has come to an end. From now on, this will be a nation of law, which enforces the law."

GOI Officials Voice New Resolve

15. (S) Embassy has privately heard these sentiments from contacts throughout the GOI and the private sector, as well. On January 18, Dror Etkes, settlement watch coordinator for Peace Now, called Amona "the beginning of the second disengagement," implying that the GOI would evacuate settlers from other illegal outposts throughout the West Bank. Major General Yosef Mishlev told the Ambassador in a January 24 meeting that Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has been very clear on his expectations with respect to the outposts, and that last month he "began a policy of enforcing the law in the West Bank" (ref B). Boaz Karni (please protect), treasurer of the Economic Cooperation Foundation (ECF), told Embassy econoff on February 1 that one of the main opponents of negotiating with the settlers in Amona was Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, IDF chief of staff. According to Karni, Halutz wanted to carry out the demolitions because he felt that ruling "this country meant not giving in to lawbreakers." Brigadier General (ret.) Baruch Spiegel, Ministry of Defense advisor, told the Ambassador on February 2 that Amona is the first major West Bank outpost with permanent housing to be targeted, and that this sends strong signals to the settlers about Olmert's plans to evacuate more outposts, even if it takes time.

16. (C) Olmert has told us he vows to remove unauthorized outposts -- starting with the Hebron market -- and fully "abide by the commitments Sharon made about building in settlements" (ref C). Olmert's decision to move on Amona nonetheless has an internal political rationale that goes beyond international commitments. His policy decision, which falls shy of addressing the broader, and much more sensitive issue of removing state-sanctioned settlements in the occupied territories, allows him significant room to form future coalitions across the political spectrum from Meretz to the ultra-orthodox the day after the elections. What remains of the right -- the Likud, the National Religious Party, and the National Union -- must remain in the periphery or make, in the words of Shimon Peres, "an unconvincing tack back toward the political center." After Amona, Netanyahu has been forced into choosing between the unpopular position of challenging the rule of law and the security establishment, or remaining quiet. The impact on Olmert's political standing remains unclear. Shalom Tourgeman, Ariel Sharon's (and now Olmert's) foreign policy advisor, told the DCM on February 6, however, that he believes Likud is readying a package of elements to attack Olmert, including the demolitions and Hamas' victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, which could affect Olmert negatively. He remarked that as of right now, however, the Prime Minister's Bureau could not determine if the Amona

demolitions would positively or negatively affect Olmert's ratings in the polls.

17. (C) Nevertheless, GOI officials have already called for further dismantlements of outposts, despite the fact that the wounds of Amona are still fresh. Internal Security Minister Gideon Ezra was quoted on February 3 saying that three outposts will be dismantled near Nablus. Spiegel told the Ambassador that Arussi and Skelly farms would go before the elections on March 28, after the GOI follows the necessary legal procedures to evacuate the outposts. In another attempt to show who is in control in the West Bank, the IDF withdrew its protection at Yitzhar settlement, near Nablus, after settlers physically attacked IDF soldiers and vehicles on two separate occasions on February 2.

Movement Fragmentation?

18. (C) The evacuations of the past weeks in Amona and in the Hebron market raise questions about what is happening internally to the settler movement as a whole. Yair Hirschfeld, executive director of ECF, told Embassy econoff on February 1 that the settler movement is now dividing into three groups. He characterized the first group as comprising settlers, such as Shaul Goldstein (more comments in para 11) and Otniel Schneller, who are adapting to the change in Israeli thinking, and understand that they "have to get out of a lot of the territories." Press reports over the past few months have indicated that many of the settlers who are willing to leave are located to the east of the separation barrier, and come from the settlements of Ma'ale Ephraim, Ofarim, Bet Arye, and Tene Omarim. In September 2005, for example, the Bayt Achad (One Home) Movement polled settlers outside of the separation barrier and found that approximately 20,000 of 100,000 would be willing to evacuate their settlements for compensation.

19. (C) Hirschfeld said that the second group is the radicalized right-wing, who are mainly, but not exclusively, the youth settlers disenchanted from the state after Gaza Disengagement. According to Karni, these settlers feel that due to what they see as the lack of significant display of trauma on their behalf during Gaza Disengagement, they are willing to go even further with violence because they know they have already lost public support, and have nothing to lose. Spiegel characterized the radical right as "kids who didn't listen to their leaders" and will not be easy to control in the future. In the words of Rabbi Avi Gisser, a rabbi of Ofra settlement (mother settlement to Amona outpost), "The humiliated settler leadership, with the scars of Gush Katif, can no longer stop the teenagers, who have lost the last vestiges of confidence in the state authorities and their conduct." Shimon Riklin, head of the young settler group Dor Ha Hemshech, complained to ConGen poloff on February 5 that "this government (GOI) wants war. The Israeli police acted like Nazis at Amona." He opined that Olmert wanted to show that was a "big leader" by using excessive force against the protestors. He added that the settlers were not threats like Hamas, but rather part of the solution and that if the GOI continued to evacuate settlements in this manner, they would "destroy all of Israel."

110. (C) The third group, according to Hirschfeld, is in the middle: the leaders from the YESHA council, including Zambish Hever, Bentzi Lieberman, Adi Mintz, and Pinchas Wallerstein, who was run out of Amona. Hirschfeld explained that this group is "lost," and that the members "don't know where to go and are treading in illusion." He reminded econoff that Mintz published a brochure in January calling for Israel to keep 60 percent of the West Bank and give 40 percent to the Palestinians. According to Hirschfeld, "the reality is not there and they can't make a decision." Yariv Oppenheimer, secretary general of Peace Now, expressed similar sentiments to econoff on February 2. He said that Wallerstein is concerned because he knows that ultimately the public understands "we have to leave." According to Oppenheimer, Wallerstein has not tried to control the youth settlers because he does not know what the best option is. He explained that if the settlers are "good," and Gaza Disengagement is too easy, they lose the public because Israelis will ask for more evacuations. On the other hand, if the settlers are "bad," they lose public support because they hurt Israeli soldiers, and the public will call for more evacuations.

111. (C) Shaul Goldstein, mayor of the Gush Etzion Regional Council and a leading figure in the YESHA Council, opined to ConGen poloff on February 5 that both the protestors and Israeli security forces approached Amona with the wrong attitude, which led to excessive violence. However, he stated that the Israeli police were brutal and crossed the line in law enforcement. Jessica Montell, executive director of B'tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights

in the Occupied Territories, told ConGen poloff on February 5 that B'tselem has requested that the Israeli Ministry of Justice launch an investigation into excessive police force used against protestors at Amona. She opined, after viewing videotapes of the incident, that the Israeli police used excessive force even against people who were fleeing the scene of the protests. She questioned why the Israeli police charged in with batons and horses, without using teargas, and noted that it is hard to believe the police did not show the same amount of restraint as in Gush Katif. She fears that there will be an escalation of Israeli settler attacks against the Palestinians because of their anger at the GOI over Amona. She also said that the IDF needs to do more to protect the Palestinians. Goldstein noted that the YESHA Council has a negative perception among the younger settlers as being too moderate, especially in light of the evacuation from Gush Katif and Amona. He added that the GOI's policy of unilateralism, leaving Israeli settlers on the wrong side of the separation barrier, and the upcoming Israeli elections will place increased pressure on the Israeli settler population. He feared that the YESHA Council will not be able to control the future actions of settlers, who, in his opinion, may resort to more violence as a reaction to what they perceive as police brutality.

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JONES